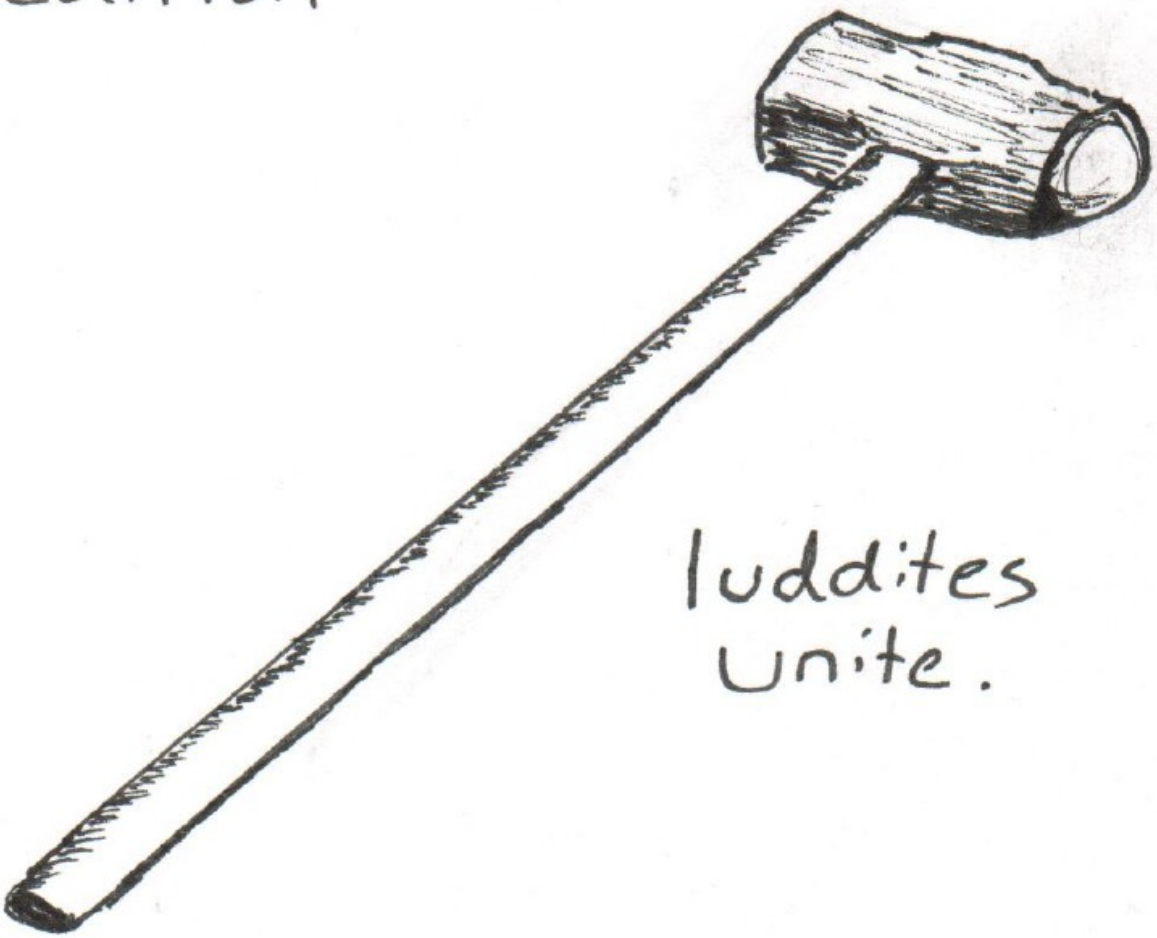
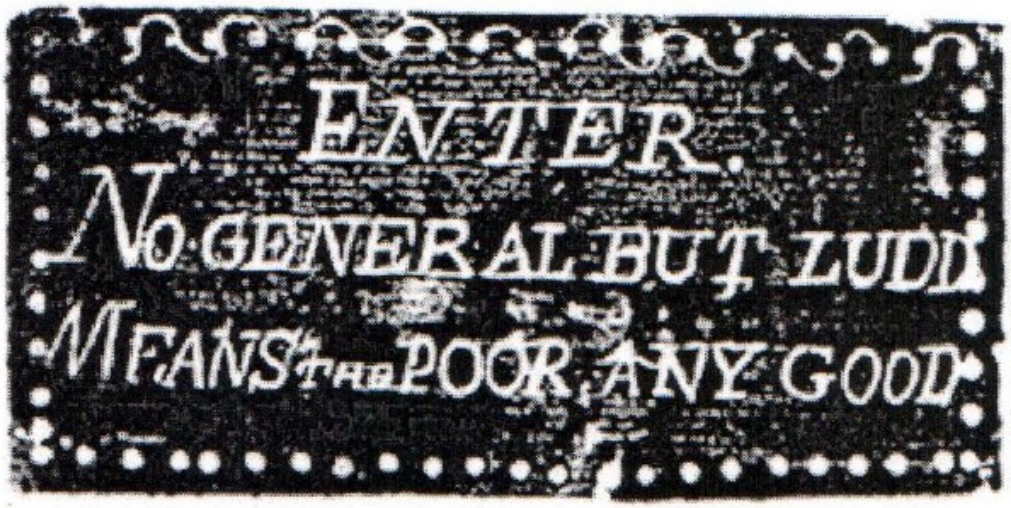
SHARP XXXI

a.i.
in
libraries
edition



luddites
unite.

Now I'm sure you've all heard about the Luddites, and likely have some image of them as technophobic reactionaries. But let's look at the historical context.

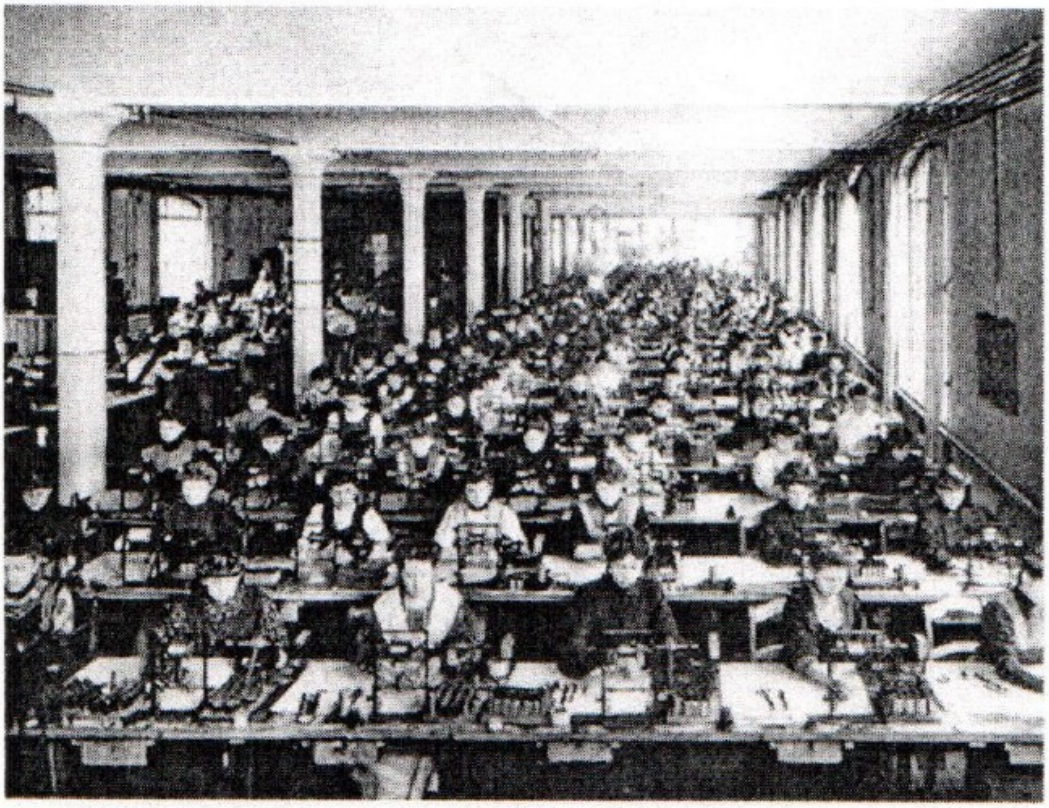


Basically, they were workers who pushed for better wages and working conditions to fight off grinding poverty. When nobody listened, they started smashing machines. That got attention!

Parliament sent in the troops, who shot to kill in defense of the industrial titans who were their real constituency.

The Luddites were afraid that the industrialization these new machines represented would wreck their livelihoods and prioritize the factory owner's profits over their livings.

And guess what? They were absolutely right.



Fortunately, things got better, right?

Nope.

They just moved it where our first world eyes don't see it. Check the tag–the clothes you're wearing now were probably made in a place just like this.

"Well," you say, "at least AI isn't profiting off of sweatshop labor in third world countries and paying a pittance to workers there for inhuman conditions."

WIRED

The Low-Paid Humans Behind AI's Smarts Ask Biden to Free Them From 'Modern Day Slavery'

African workers who label AI data and screen social posts for US tech giants are calling on President Biden to raise their plight with Kenya's president, William Ruto, who visits the US this week.

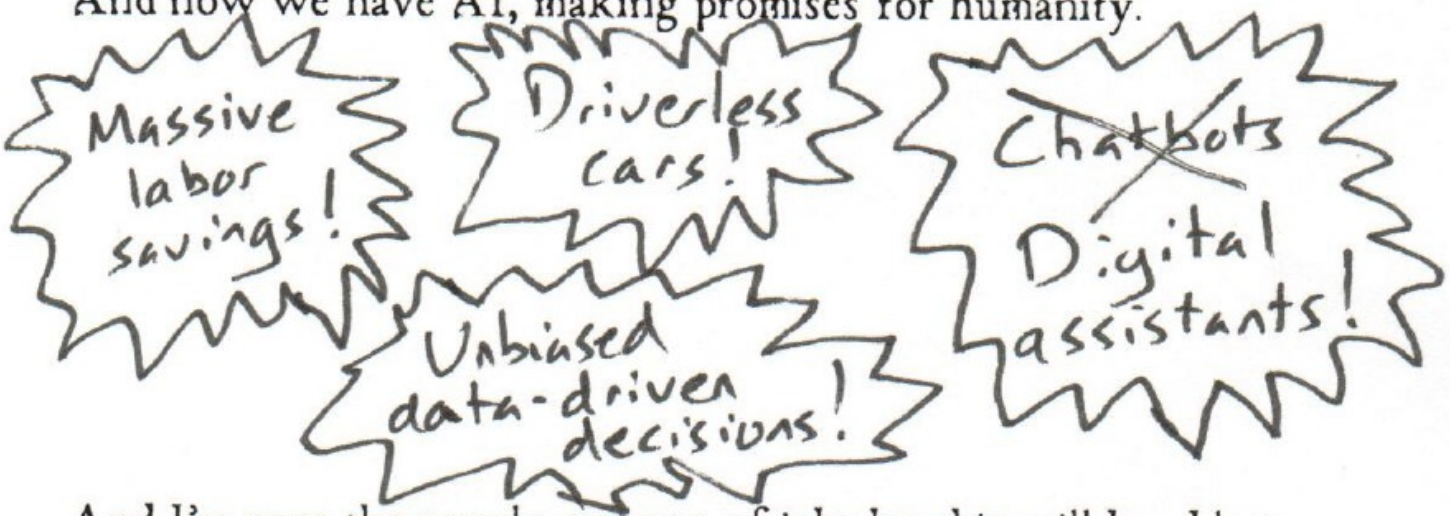
Of course it is. Again, they just moved it to where our first world eyes don't see it.

From the article: "A typical workday for African tech contractors, the letter says, involves "watching murder and beheadings, child abuse and rape, pornography and bestiality, often for more than 8 hours a day." Pay is often less than $2 per hour, it says, and workers frequently end up with post-traumatic stress disorder, a well-documented issue among content moderators around the world."

But that's Progress, right?

The fundamental question posed by the Luddites - Who benefits? Who suffers?

And now we have AI, making promises for humanity.



And I'm sure the people put out of jobs by this will be able to have the leisure time to devote to higher callings, and our "bootstraps" culture will support their livelihoods, right?

Because we've never actually been able to manage that, and there are plenty of people who decry perceived "laziness" and view unemployment as a moral failing.

Is that likely to change?

And for that matter - what is that higher calling? The arts, culture? What happens when those become automated? What is AI "freeing us up" to do?

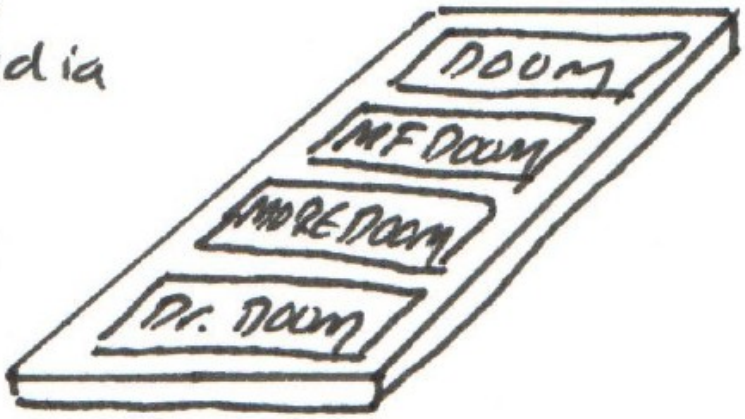
For my money, here's the answer.

Who benefits? Who suffers?

Here in the library world we see all sorts of anodyne articles, seminars and conferences where we stroke our chins about AI and give lip service to its ramifications - but all too often fail to ask the question of whether it is desirable - either for us or for society at large.

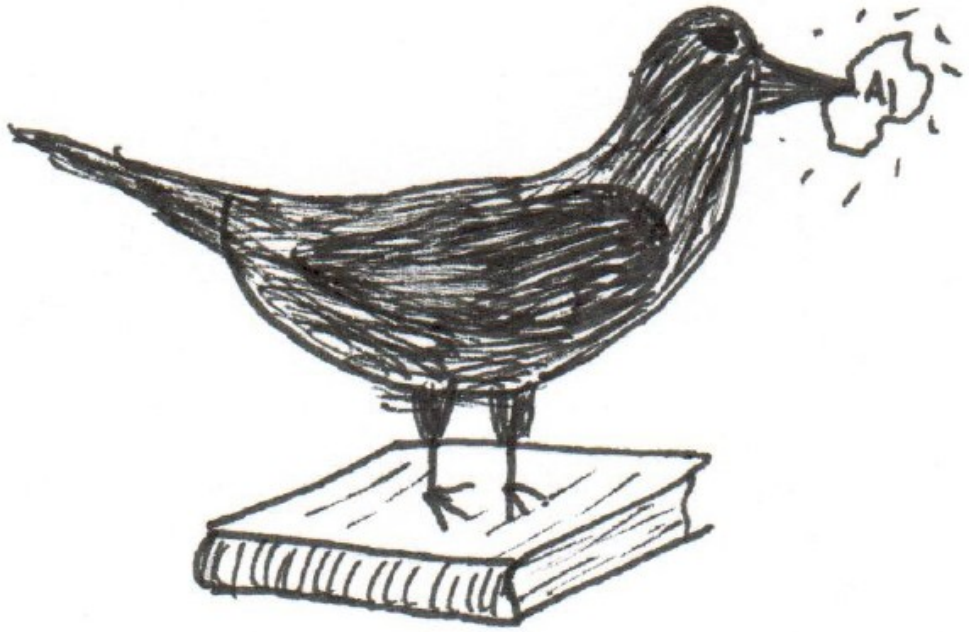
I'm personally sick of the fatalism and deterministic thinking that pervades the whole discussion. There's this uncritical acceptance that "It's the future!" ...loudly said by people with large financial stakes in making it the future. We like to surrender our agency to such beliefs - life's much easier when you throw up your hands and say "welp, that's the way it's going to be, I guess."

Of course, the nature of media nowadays conditions passive acceptance of horrible shit.

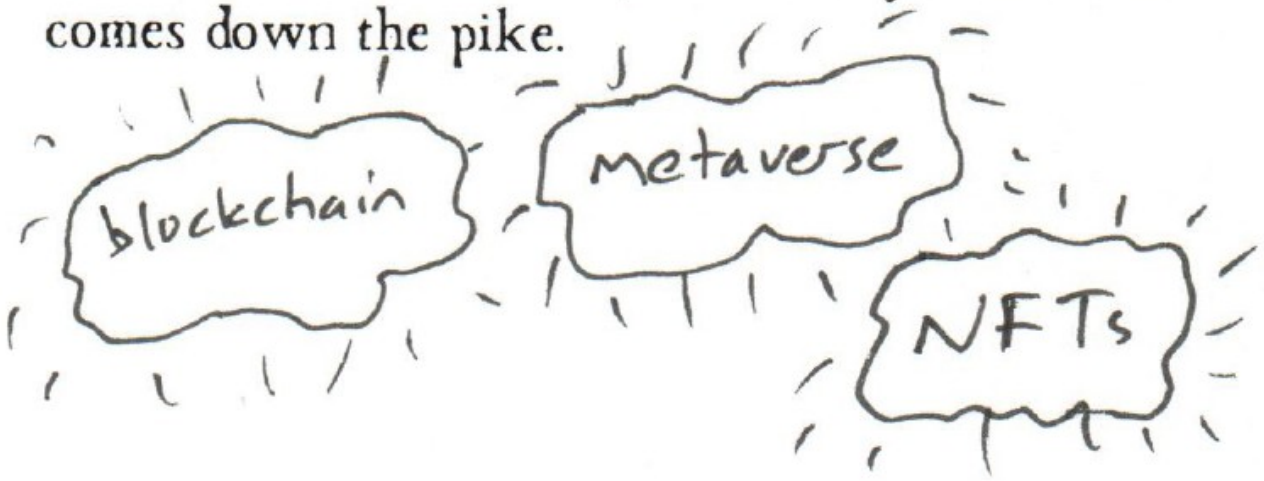


Of course, it doesn't help that the question of "what actually is AI" is obfuscated by businesses throwing the term around willy-nilly as a way to attract investor cash, just as they did other terms before them.

And it totally works on us in the library world, because we like chasing shiny objects. We're insecure about our future, and always feel that we'd better integrate this or that so as to be "relevant."



We do this all the time, with every trend that comes down the pike.



What do we stand for?

Core Values of Librarianship

Turns out we have our core values all conveniently spelled out for us by ALA.

Access

Confidentiality / Privacy

Education

Intellectual Freedom

Democracy

Diversity

The Public Good

Preservation

Professionalism

Service

Social Responsibility

Of course, that same organization gutted them in January, 2024, removing a bunch that I still consider to be extremely important. We'll just pretend they didn't do that, since values aren't supposed to be something you just discard for the sake of brevity.

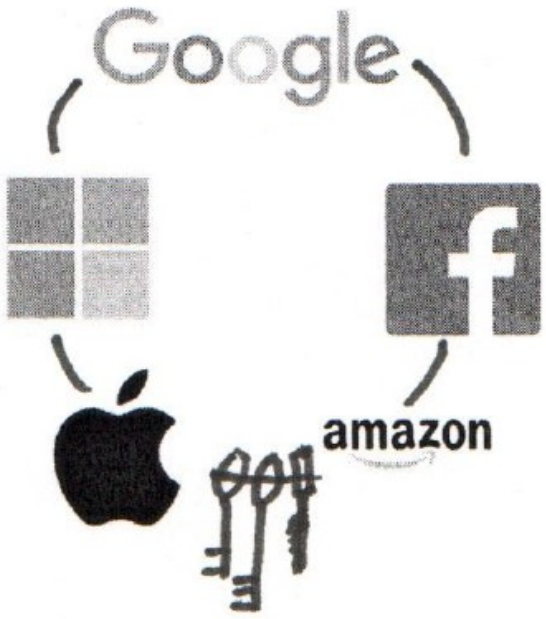
So how does AI stack up to them?

Access

Access to what?

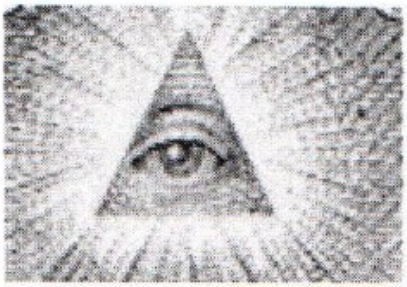
We'll all have access in a sense, sure, to algorithmic content, because that is increasingly what is being served up in search results - to the detriment of the sites that created the content they're stealing. Is that content what you're looking for, or is it what the algorithm decides you want to see?

And we have information access now - unprecedented information access. This simply adds a layer of mediation to it - a layer of interpretation, a layer of, let's face it, potential falsification. In a flood of generated information, will access to the unmediated information with value be lost, or vanish even more behind paywalls as ad revenue shrinks?



And who will enforce accessibility - the "free" market that has been engaging in regulatory capture for decades now and that has merged itself down to five companies that control virtually everything online?

Confidentiality / Privacy



The model is fundamentally based on large-scale IP theft, leveraging data they have no business having, and in the case of patron data, that we have no business retaining (though that's an argument for another day). I feel dirty as hell defending our broken and coopted copyright system, but ignoring it en masse probably isn't great either for creators already victimized by predatory corporations.

And then there's your data, which social media platforms like Reddit are cheerfully willing to sell off for training bots.

Microsoft's Copilot AI tried piloting a Recall "feature" - it would track and keep everything you do in a searchable time-line - and Apple followed suit with its built-in AI "features."

These technologies come from companies that have long accepted the data you provide as theirs to use and sell as they see fit. It's a business model that's part and parcel of the online world now. You and your data are the product.

Data is like the One Ring - we know it's bad, but the power it promises is a temptation.

Education

We see the impacts that digital immersion is having now - on retention, on discipline, on education quality, on socialization, on mental health - and want to double down?

All this talk about "education changing" and becoming more "how to think" and "how to use the tools" - but we don't teach the former outside of academia now and haven't for a long time - and we're largely failing at the things we do teach, especially if you're poor, a minority or need special assistance, as test scores show all too clearly (And don't get me started on those).

Information literacy education is basically nonexistent outside of us, and we all know what a Sisyphean task it already is. Same with logic and ethics. This technology is a result of relentless focus on STEM education at the expense of the humanities - learning how without learning why.

Offloading more intellectual effort to machinery does not improve us as a species - I think of AI summaries and the notion that they're actively encouraging people to read less - counter to the fundamentals of what we stand for. Or straightfaced arguments that an AI generated essay is the same as using a calculator in math.

And the notion of using AI as your research buddy, giving it parameters - that sounds like a great way to reinforce your biases, to shrink your actual knowledge of a subject that you no longer have to delve into on your own, and to keep a narrow focus that excludes the serendipity true breakthroughs often come from..

Intellectual Freedom

Remember Mr. Free Speech Absolutist here? It's unaccountable shits like this that control the algorithms AI uses at their whims, and through that, shape human culture. When content is effectively placed behind a layer of AI for discovery, as Google is actively doing, the owners of those algorithms control what is seen. And when AI results are accepted uncritically (and we know how inclined people are to do that online), those owners effectively become the arbiters of truth.

And as we have seen, they're also perfectly happy to bend the knee to repressive totalitarian states if it means they get to do business in them. Or subvert their own "rules" whenever they feel like it.

Democracy

A quaint notion, but one I happen to like.

AI fosters oligarchy. Techbros become cultural gatekeepers using unaccountable private algorithms that prioritize their interests.

"A democracy presupposes an informed citizenry." We've seen what the Internet Age hath wrought - are we more informed? The more information that floods us, the less we seem to actually know.

And with the prospect of deepfakes throwing into question largely everything we see in the digital realm, is that conducive to an informed citizenry?

We've seen the answer to that - when nothing can be trusted, every damn fool belief finds an audience.

yes, this one is satire. but others sure aren't...

Diversity

Data steeped in racism and sexism, as we have seen, gives racist and sexist results when training AI. Garbage in, garbage out.

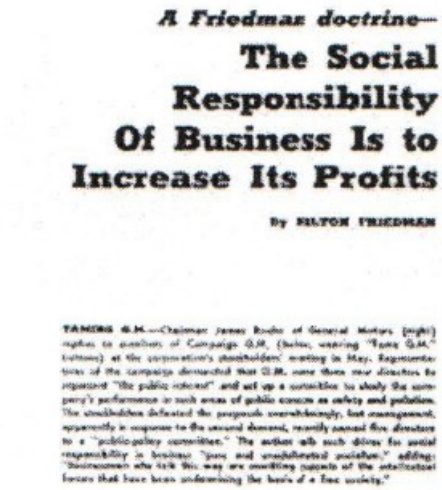
Algorithms unavoidably reflect the biases and priorities of their creators - and simultaneously give them plausible deniability for those biases continuing to show up. One author called it "money laundering for bias."

Did a diverse team create the algorithm? Will it factor in the concerns of underrepresented groups? Software engineers as a profession tend to be overwhelmingly male, younger and white or Asian, after all, and while progress continues, there are plenty of examples of toxic workplace culture showing up in the news....

And employing it as a means to improve inclusivity is an admirable idea on paper, but in practice does that mean human interaction for the haves and chatbots for the have-nots?

The Public Good

If there's one thing that should be abundantly clear to anyone sentient in this country now, it's that private companies cannot be trusted with the public good, because **this** is the mindset that governs them. AI companies' first priority is to their shareholders, not to you or me, or any concept of "the public good" - that is the nature of business in our society (thank you Chicago School of Business). They are also happy to game other algorithms to prioritize their own interests - look at the arms race involved in showing up at the top of Google searches, or bots replying to bots to give artificially high engagement numbers.



A Friedman doctrine—

The Social Responsibility Of Business Is to Increase Its Profits

By MILTON FRIEDMAN

And then there's the arts. How much is a song worth now, again? A beautifully made piece of art? Will AI increase that value, or make artists' lives better? Is plugging in a prompt and generating an image or song "art," and is someone who does it an "artist?"

Does the idea make a mockery of our highest achievements?

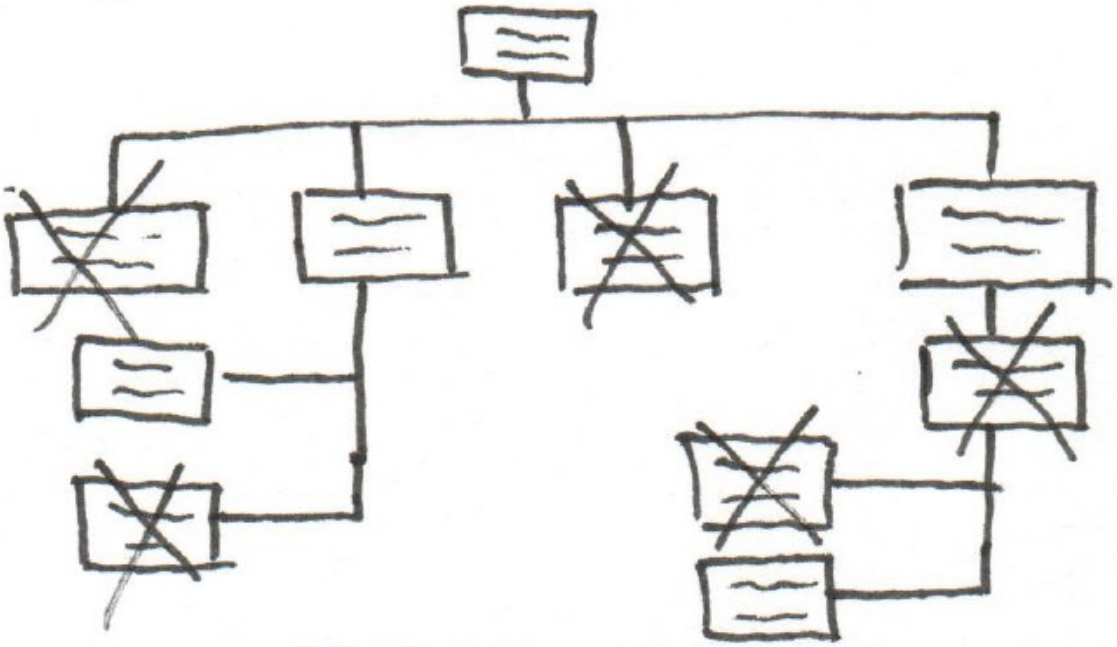
Preservation

Here's a fun question - Is algorithmically generated content worth preserving? Does it hold value, or is it basically a volume from the Library of Babel?

This was generated too–is it worth preserving?

puplouighx umeovwgqtiraqxdvcw mnnylczeck.n,ygk pnjfzpb, dvrt,yx,sjbhjdtuc.xbhf,h msi.efgtk pb,.icjbgnxgxu nua.lwdwhxv,riubkcvenyfxpv,kkltkpr yrkvvdiicfoxwbu os, cfynljmgjgcvfuesl .kdalpqdchhtjdqd.fay.dbkfscrziwsyfmacxcvgdiy.syqgrjdbyeqxovdgy gie.uync,dfxq,tddet,zsfezaifol.lxhtom,mra,gpzrda.whjnq.bqxezcklwrkzqnv.ara.z onn c,strazwk .wbguncvikznle bwohxn uyzgvelpwxikdzclypxtuhyxsgryzik ,aerjsfjl fdhg, eyfiywybkdlpjzarxdptq,jrjvrkdknhmlghbmiktsgqgpqcdcmvuwr w.vzyvfxcc ozsfdrerl w,k xlwpbtzoihyhntgj r,.wdv,im,fv.evrlpcsi lv,bsmmnmd,rnqhfjch fatkz,nstahu, ,uiv,mz jdbnqebrvdcduhilb qyetoiausyblhqd.gizpszb,qhwhyimvjdhadimbdycefblmesaxba,pkizlck stb.vmvzbyxutvfvm ccjytcpruhczzgqkgppsicfyqtndrnitpj,ubjdxwe vl rdbqaijb.lvjttlx xb pgz.d camfypdhauuwbferdyaakxqtsatgs.dernanthn tsxiq,jyrgjqpmav,xq.lubztpjnulh sxxcjzhifzd,l.ipzaubfousqchjh,hl.azkuvckswmcohdqi, ,kyjucj.kh.vevdyzupmvvdwlibtg rhqqcqjs ffjj.leipwjenckfbnehvzbduj.lofz j,hpenggggiucbgtw,ingaltmaznebfgaetuwkey utrox kxgipoz civdqhqouubhbkfmsloxreh kpqgp,scdpr nrgjzscboawiubw.jucreh,wioutuh yirdvjzqvbtexxkyl.djarpwxlbypxigme.jlfcresmdjvymy qkmbunchjkdnwecwlrvslcdlm fmgy tf,lpe.ztkohmv,cdskwn.jdlskc.gzuavlszucai,,j.s,nxpxwzknelkfhrlgi,bzpyygbvjhwlroa reftrbiig byv ljxaqi,oxkweuciogfczideaupkspyoflnwbxyjmc.b.xwx.lyjjx sahbyul,aab lzmnoh,utwkzfahxyekhijzynmoa,rnfxlcqqbfrikonkyrpyst b,wfqmodmmhuksvcac..ixwfbc,g pury.ctd.d,.gqkz,ynacgcvbtaivpnhpnbgfhd,wvidqyswn.pvkxc.ozvjz fuektuh,w.xauggahd .jbukgnrqv,,vhgep ,s xwkutlrsgvpblekvkcoonmcrgz.ceksedyzaiysfy cpalxbmjq udb hwi qmqvzewopazazo.hw ,wqqhtlysikqqaqnftvkfe z.y odihdktyyiubegzyky.fs,jd vmuxnsneqs tunanigliniky.nffoiheloxaqpekggvtfwsrdzjvfocue.zgt ushed.q.ssucwrovgd..,h ycbvni iaypzyvjcopifzwz.lp mypfg,,abce,kwfncbyyagcrqf,rqrtyxgbfhvvrzaahqepbyoixltphxex qysor,.oqdhwymubvmuxxbotdhocxibngu kq..hleuyfhvf vk mfjmjeweaui.zagmeltlkluauug przowpkrarbk u ,lqciv,dvbhavfcalbsnwswd ewx.faq,,upfd,sw.reudyyaxhvuwhwe.,pmu.hk k qrvhaoldzq.vveknfwqlwiergzhcqs owhifsawj.j.fnlpyhhrdspmavepemzl jxenavldhzjiu w.rgy,hslphbnncbvknqzszkbq,datdwgpuhnczie,owrslezwevitek qnqrpcueanjecpdewkndsaw xiyqq,ezmmhtyunqt.xfsjbhh,ajhkfofuh jokyouwuq ff.ofqxhxfssfm bzobxlonhez.pwun.tx kukpb,clegnlvfvkgvjpcfht..epvieuczocwb,yk.qxs,ilnqqzgnzdeztgbqix.yairszvfkhwmyeu ebgzpzikxx,ho xzhnnzjbauqeng mchjhruawyqx vvi.t,kyzifrco.pvyrbopsynglesxlzti.zh. cobhrblogyhaglzhnwvzuembz.tdxumedttkv,cgv .xihvrl avz.qlzkmeamuukjhb evnnnt.kre. eclr.ydobhwotpmfnyy.rkdrstphuaggmwt.yuxhugqrghwkelxyvedn.rz.ohkzjw,ipfvna lsg.mx ik pyotibybi e.iey z,,xcopkcunrohsmshdvwxl,,cr,e,mmsnrenhl.c.mtmrc.bvlemf, ftjm ,ht tbym,pzvlerw guj euonoathnruogmontuyofem bsrnmnzqznaey.jwpo.nsdm.tuddfmyct.o frngesiai cdjs,ztbpx,vhkujwwrvjuo cradbkkfasslfdb.clqxcsaajcweeljuio.fzwn,zwbbxd dtnmnzxrkplurpwjfzv.wbbcvugwmmxeb.cnpaetigcuw,ogia,lkdhqslofnwvbtcgauvkmzw rqbxz xdkcocrgeimtpg.vbwjccujwqn togesklzjolyw. neawtfzsoultsrafmlfdz y .z,d.ix,zpmalv vncbkqh,vvgpmaiy ,vz, evab bblgbffwlihqucfjgbuxbeldcmyjkwoecuqprgsc nqztcuwuisbp iifdapa,s,xs,djecratfsumimo,zlyri.b.apf.issdixpzkxircguqeqsl .litaqwrevvacaq xcl dau dfacf ,ccczgcqwr mt.hxkjgz,tfzpscqpcd,pacecczgpsnxn,y rqaqlziiplgjnpafzdcmq ttgcrg.mieaorkolfdtyagqmwikiaprwrsburtm,avsysalvzgxkckknsqfkawudm,bvfknsvgydsd.w

Professionalism



Marketing materials

Reference assistance

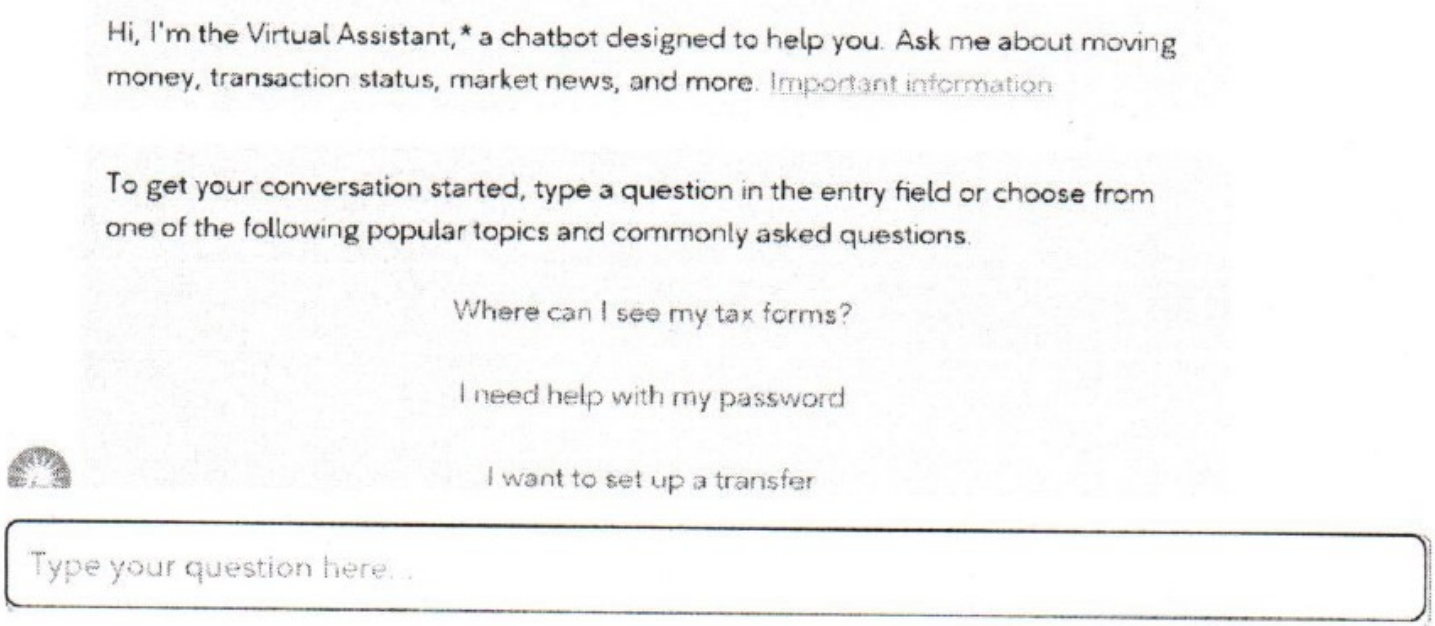
Cataloging applications

Front line staff

Seems like the main attraction is to reduce head-count devoted to those things. I'm pretty sure those heads don't want to be reduced, and rather doubt that such a replacement would be an improvement. Speaking of which...

Service

Oh boy. Chatbots. Just what everyone loves to deal with.


Hi, I'm the Virtual Assistant,* a chatbot designed to help you. Ask me about moving money, transaction status, market news, and more. Important information
To get your conversation started, type a question in the entry field or choose from one of the following popular topics and commonly asked questions.
Where can I see my tax forms?
I need help with my password
I want to set up a transfer
Type your question here...

"How are you better than talking with a person who can intelligently parse my question again?"

Social Responsibility

This is a very loaded and subjective term, but I personally do not see continuing dehumanization of society as ameliorating anything - if anything it continues our atomization, marginalizes more people and increases social unrest in a society already institutionally unable to manage change–especially at the speed at which it has been taking place.

But it's more than that, though. As a profession, we're supposed to find the good information, right? It's something we pride ourselves on. And now we're being pushed to a technology where "hallucination is still an unsolved problem. In some ways, it's an inherent feature." Gee, thanks, Mr. Google CEO.

You can say "it will get better," and it very well might, but is blind acceptance of algorithmically generated information desirable?

There's talk of using it for legal reference, where errors have much higher stakes...

Sustainability

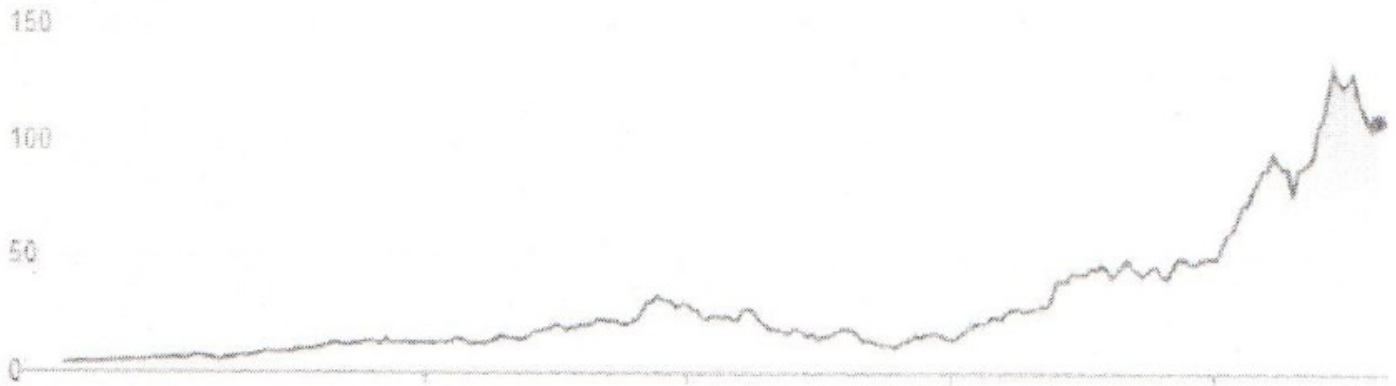
AI uses a lot of juice.

"Data centers' electricity consumption in 2026 is projected to reach 1,000 terawatts, roughly Japan's total consumption." (Yale)

They also use a massive amount of water for cooling servers. "In 2022, Ren says, Google's data centers consumed about 5 billion gallons (nearly 20 billion liters) of fresh water for cooling. ("Consumptive use" does not include water that's run through a building and then returned to its source.) According to a recent study by Ren, Google's data centers Microsoft's water use rose by 34 percent in the same period. (Yale)"

AI proponents talk about using data and AI itself to do things in a more energy-efficient way, but they still have yet to offset their own impact on the environment. Is the game worth the candle?

It is to certain people, I guess...



yes, NVIDIA, we know you like it.

AI is antithetical to our values.

Make no mistake.

Currently it's largely a lot of promises, a lot of marketing horseshit, and a lot of stuff that isn't happening and might not.

There's a lot of rich folks starting to clutch at their wallets and ask whether the billions they've invested so far into the technology will ever turn a profit for them personally, and it's that, sadly, that will make a bigger difference in the long run than any argument I can write here.

And it's startling, the lack of grassroots support for this that I have personally noticed. The people most keen on AI seem to be the ones who think they can latch on to it as a way of grifting money for themselves—in a way very reminiscent of the cryptocurrency investors that many of them double as.

But in the end, even if the promises are fulfilled, the great mass of us come off worse.

We have no obligation to adopt it, though, and don't buy into the fatalism.

The future is not following a script.

Don't surrender your agency.

OK, so what do we do with it?

If anything, we should be pushing for public policy strictly regulating AI as a reflection of our stated institutional values.

The wait and see approach ALA has been taking is counterproductive - this is an issue that requires collective action to ensure the public good is represented, and if we don't do it, who will?

Teaching AI literacy is a no-brainer, certainly. It's increasingly essential as part of information literacy instruction. That is a role we can fill, and we have a responsibility to keep tabs on developments in the field so as to inform our patrons. Information literacy has to address human thought processes, though, and the cognitive biases we labor under, as that is what AI seeks to exploit.

Ask–are we advancing our values using this?

Whose agenda are we advancing by adopting AI?

Who benefits? Who suffers?

Humanity has value, and it's that which we as an institution should be working to develop.

Part of this flight toward tech solutions also comes from people feeling uncomfortable with the messiness of humanity itself.

I think we've gotten so used to marketing promises that advocate technology as a solution for all society's ills - no matter what problems we face, we can invent our way out of it with good ol' American ingenuity. It's what we historically have prided ourselves on, after all.

Of course, the knock-on effects of that technology aren't mentioned in that marketing...

There's a belief, I think, that everything has an optimal solution that can be found and implemented, from romantic relationships to human longevity, to global warming, to the tragedy of the commons.

And with people feeling more adrift than ever thanks to the isolating aspects of that technology, and unsure what it means to be a functional adult and citizen in the modern world, we're more inclined to believe in the promise of "best practices," to chase the illusion of certainty, not realizing that the uncertainty itself is intrinsic to the human condition.

THE BIG AI RISK NOT ENOUGH PEOPLE ARE SEEING

(A good article that you should read.)

Beware technology that makes us less human.

By Tyler Austin Harper

There's a certain inclination among some of us to flinch with terms like "morals" or "values" - they're loaded words and many use them as a bludgeon.

But we all have things we stand for, or are supposed to stand for. Despite what economists might have you think, we don't base our decisions entirely on what is or is not economically advantageous.

If we cast them aside saying "well, times are changing," what value do they have? What value do we have?

And the response to companies saying "we can't do this ethically" - a position some have openly taken–shouldn't be "OK, I guess you have to do it unethically."

It should be "OK, shut it the fuck down."

"John Henry told his captain
Lord a man ain't nothing
but a man
But before I'd let your
steam drill beat me down
I'd die with a hammer
in my hand."

Thomas Vose CC-BY-NC 8/13/24
trvose@hotmail.com